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ARTISTS' TOOLBOX

Artists' communities advance creativity

By Jane Waggoner Deschner,
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In the fall, I attended the 22nd Annual Conference of the Alliance of Artists Communities in Kansas City, representing the Montana Arts Council. Artists' communities, also called residencies, are places where artists of all kinds go to have time, space and support for the creation of new work and the exploration of new ideas.

The alliance is an association of more than 1,500 of these communities and residencies worldwide. They explain, "Artists' communities are not about retreat; they are about advancement. Advancing creativity. Advancing human progress. Advancing the way we examine the world."

This is the only field "dedicated solely to the creation of new work among independent artists." I found them to be a very passionate, committed and thoughtful group.

Topics discussed at the conference ranged from "Selecting Artists: Process and Priorities" to "Making a Living, Making a Life: Supporting Artists' Careers," and from "Trends in Public Philanthropy" to presentations by individual artists and about particular programs. As a visual artist who has benefited greatly from residency experiences, I was most interested in learning how individual artists can better access and participate in the residency opportunities available.

What kinds of artists go to these communities to work? Visual artists, writers, composers, musicians, choreographers, dancers, scholars, filmmakers, community artists, architects, etc. Each residency specifies the disciplines it accommodates. Locations vary widely: 60% are in rural areas and small towns; 40% are in urban areas.

An artist spends from one week to two years. You might be the only resident or there can be two dozen.

Some residencies provide an artist with a bedroom, studio and three meals a day – all at no charge. Some charge a nominal fee or base payment on an artist's ability to pay. At others, you are just provided a studio and find your own living quarters. You may do your own cooking in a communal kitchen. Sometimes you buy your own groceries; others give you a stipend and/or stock the basics.

Each has established how it operates and what it expects the artist to provide in his/her day-to-day living. Although each is organized differently, they all offer the artist "an opportunity to invest in creation, in the leaps of imagination and risk-taking that compel a person to put pen to page, or fingers to keyboard, or brush to canvas in the first place."

Why do I go to residencies? It's the work I can do and the people I will meet. When the primary focus of my day is my art, I am able to access that place where new ideas bubble up. That's harder for me to do among the distractions and constraints of everyday life. I accomplish lots of work and reading when that's what I am supposed to be doing.

Montana is isolated from the larger art world. At a residency, I am with people from all over the country and other parts of the world. By living and working together, I have

you," which will help you find and evaluate which residencies would be a good fit.

Some residencies are harder to get into than others. I've heard of artists applying to a highly competitive residency five or ten times before being accepted. When deciding which residencies to spend your time and energy on and money applying to, be realistic about the quality of your work and the stage of your career. Apply to some less competitive places and work your way up.

Every application, for me, is a learning experience, but I am also realistic about my chances of being accepted. If you are rejected or wait-listed, keep trying. The jurors change; your work gets better.

One residency, Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, has the policy of accepting 50% new and 50% returning residents. That gives first-time applicants a distinct edge in applying.

The LEAW Foundation of Missoula also sponsors a fully-funded, one-month residency at the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, specifically for an artist, writer or composer from Montana. That deadline is May 15, 2013. Send a letter with a project budget to LEAW Family Foundation Inc., P.O. Box 1629, Missoula, MT 59806-1629.

At the conference, I also picked up some great tips:

- Read the guidelines very carefully. If you have questions, call or email.
 - Some places emphasize quality of work. For others, your proposed project is foremost. Find out what is most important to each residency. Be sure your application, your work, fits what they want.
 - Apply with your best work. If you are a visual artist, send an installation shot.
 - Now that most applications are done online, it's not possible to submit them late. But the ease of online application has increased the number of artists that jurors have to consider. Keep your fingers crossed that the juror will not come to your application when he/she is hungry, thirsty or tired.
 - Finally, be aware that residencies will cost you, whether it's time away from work, travel expenses or actual residency fees. Some residencies have stipends and scholarships. The Montana Arts Council has Strategic Investment Grants that can help artists with some costs. For an application visit www.art.mt.gov/orgs/orgs_sig.asp.
- For me, exploring my creativity, imagination and risk-taking are why I'm an artist, and having the encouragement, validation and support to do those things is critical. My art has improved and my world has broadened as a result of time spent at artists' residencies in ways that couldn't have happened otherwise.



"Hepburn, Never," from the Maxim Series, by Jane Waggoner Deschner

become friends with visual artists, writers, dancers and composers I'd never have met otherwise. These people are as diverse and fascinating as a Maori choreographer from New Zealand, an internationally known therapist and composer, and a wonderful African-American novelist – all remain Facebook friends.

Being accepted to a residency is a competitive process. A few residencies are by invitation only, but most have open applications that are decided by a jury. Some juries change with each evaluation cycle; some keep the same jurors for several years.

Most applications are now online and require a sample of your work, résumé, statement and/or project proposal, letters of recommendation and an application fee (usually \$30–\$50). The Alliance of Artist Communities website (www.artistcommunities.org/) is THE PLACE to go for information about all their members and contact information for each. You can sign up for emails to receive upcoming application deadlines.

Each residency has a page on the site where you see the location, statistics (average number of artists at one time, number accepted from total applicant pool), eligibility, past residents and quotes, facilities and services, fees, stipends, and other info. The website has a section, "Choosing the right residency for

Two Montanans among Watermedia winners

The Montana Watercolor Society hosted its 30th annual Watermedia in October at the Bigfork Museum of Art and History. The national juried show, featuring paintings by 50 artists from 19 states, opened Oct. 5.

Internationally known artist and juror Carla O'Connor gave an artist's talk during the reception on Oct. 5. She discussed her top selections – Gold Award (\$1,000): "Provider 1" by Yuri Ozaki of Alabama; Silver Award (\$750): "Madame Jacqueline" by Barbara Keith of Montana; and Bronze Award (\$600): "Glance" by Carol McSweeney of Montana.

In selecting the winning works, O'Connor says, "It is important first and foremost that the pieces follow the principles of design, and then are selected on how the (artist) pushed themselves in using the medium or how the piece made me go 'aha.'"

She praised Ozaki's painting for "how the artist dealt with this heavy, large fallen tree with such delicacy, almost a whisper, which I saw as a very risky way of dealing with an organic subject matter of such size."



"Madame Jacqueline" by Barbara Keith

Keith's painting, she noted, "blew me away. It is very hard to do something so simple, and make it simple, using three varying object sizes rather than 300. The use of lighting, the patterns, say it all – nothing overworked."

O'Connor appreciated McSweeney's attentiveness to her work. "This is a particularly

nice piece with the figure well done, as it is all about the figure."

Three merit awards of \$500 each were awarded: the Nancy Beelman Award went to Penny Strommen's "Making Choices"; the MTWS Founders' Award was received by Mary Keefer for "Wheat Fields in Spring"; and the MTWS President's Award (selected by Ron Paulick) was given to Peggy Woods for "Lake Como Headwaters."

In selecting Woods's painting from among 48 entries for the President's Award, Paulick praised the design elements and technical prowess. "There is a clear statement about the beauty of water and place in her painting," he said.

Two merit awards of \$100 each went to Robert Hubbach for "Flowing Through" and Judy Rose Ulberg for "Bones in the Woods." Becky Ross received the Golden Artist Colors Award (a \$100 gift certificate) for "Woody Bully." Several other merchandise awards were given, ranging in value from \$25-\$250.

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